TRANSFORMING "THEM" INTO "US": SOME DANGERS IN TEACHING WOMENAND DEVELOPMENT

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No Abstract

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Courses on women and the third world, or women and development, appear to satisfy all aspects of progressive demands for curricular reform in an era of globalization and multiculturalism.[1] Such courses are international in scope, give proper attention to a segment of the world's population that is often vulnerable and generally neglected, and are likely to address issues of class and race as well as gender. There would appear to be no better vehicle for the education of university students in the United States on issues of diversity in an international context. My experience in teaching courses on women and development suggests, however, that this education is not an inevitable outcome.

I argue in this essay that despite their content (or perhaps because of it), courses on women and development do not necessarily promote student or faculty engagement with issues of diversity, and as generally taught may do just the opposite. I pursue this argument by examining difficulties I have encountered in teaching such courses. And I discuss how I have changed my approach in response to these difficulties.

I have faced a variety of challenges in teaching courses on women and development, in a number of different contexts, but certain issues recurred in every venue.[2] Crucial to a discussion of inclusiveness in the curriculum are a core set of concerns, which have led me to every major change I made in the course over time, and these I see as the major problems in teaching women and development: ethnocentrism, essentialism, and intolerance of diversity.

These are problems that I believe arise also in the field of women and development, and in some ways the evolution of my course has mirrored that of the field itself. In the earliest women in development (WID) literature (arising in the 1970s and early 1980s),[3] and in the earliest version of my course, the central issues were posed in these terms: What are the conditions under which women in the third world live, and what can be done to improve their lives? In the field and in the literature, the answers to these questions were based on the practical experience of development practitioners, with policy uncritically posited as the solution.

Underlying all of this practical experience and advice, of course, was a theoretical perspective on what defines development, what constitutes an improvement in women's lives, and how best to achieve

desired goals. This perspective was, in general, an ethnocentric one. Improvement was understood in terms of an increase in material welfare, especially as measured by rising gross domestic product (GDP), with the template for development being that which has occurred in the first world, that is, modernization. The means to achieving this goal was fairly straightforward: show people new technologies, provide them with capital and access to credit in order to increase production and income. The WID version of this was that women should be given equal or preferential access to technology, capital, and credit so that they would not be left behind in the process of development.

More recently, there has been a shift in the literature to an emphasis on gender systems, especially on how such systems result in women's disadvantage. The feminist literature on gender and development, such as Gita Sen and Caren Grown's 1987 book, *Development, Crises, and Alternative Visions,* suggests that the main concern should be women's empowerment. This does not preclude improving access to technology, capital, and credit, or an interest in improving women's material well-being, but it does argue that the transformation of gender systems to further empower women is a necessary condition of increasing their well-being.[4]

To get at these kinds of issues in class, I use material that presents the complexity of women's lives, such as *I, Rigoberta Menchú,* an autobiographical account of the Guatemalan indigenous activist (1984), or Tsitsi Dangarembga's 1988 novel *Nervous Conditions.* From works such as these, students can discuss the limitations of the modernization model's emphasis on material welfare, as well as its disregard of history, particularly that of colonialism and its legacies. Generally, my students did not have any problems understanding or accepting this perspective.

But this difference in approach did little to transform students' ethnocentric attitudes of patronage and protection. The interpretation of development resulting from such an approach (especially common among feminist students) goes something like this: "How can we help those poor third world women see their oppression so they can become free like us?"

Implicit in this statement is the tendency to essentialize third world women—to assume that the perceived status of such women as traditional, passive, closer to nature, irrational, and so on, is essential to their character as third world women, that they have these characteristics because they *are* third world women, that they are homogeneous in these essential characteristics, and that they are therefore essentially and radically different from (and inferior to) women in the first world.

The problems in teaching the course are that students come with these ideologies already in place and that the literature does not discourage (and may encourage) the students' tendency to homogenize and make Other. Chandra Mohanty argues that Western feminist dis-

course on women and development contributes to the production of a monolithic third world woman (Mohanty 1991b, 53). She continues,

> The assumption of women as an already constituted, coherent group with identical interests and desires, regardless of class, ethnic or racial location or contradictions, implies a notion of gender or sexual difference or even patriarchy which can be applied universally and cross-culturally. . . . The second analytical presupposition is evident . . . in the uncritical way "proof" of universality and cross-cultural validity are provided. . . . I argue that as a result . . . a homogeneous notion of the oppression of women as a group is assumed, which, in turn, produces the image of an "average third world woman." (Mohanty 1991b, 55–56)

Using case studies, as I do,[5] gives students a better understanding of particular circumstances facing women in different parts of the world, but does not necessarily challenge essentialist notions of a homogeneous third world woman. It may actually be implicit in the case study method that any third world woman, faced with similar circumstances, would behave as these women do—differing circumstances produce different behavior, but the women are the same. The character of "everywoman" (here "every-third-world-woman") is the object of analysis. Case studies only illustrate differing circumstances.

Some choices I have made in the course help on one front but contribute to the problem on another. For example, I do not incorporate case studies on women in the United States, Europe, or Canada in the course, primarily because there is little opportunity for students to study Asia, Africa, and Latin America in the typical undergraduate curriculum, much less women in those countries. Although I frequently bring in examples from the United States, the focus of the course on what is traditionally defined as the third world is such that students are not immediately challenged in their tendency to see and present third world women as homogeneous and alien or Other.

These examples illustrate one of the core questions that must be grappled with in a course on women and development. Can it be taught in such a way that it discourages both the tendency to see third world women as a homogeneous Other, and the implicit paternalism of this perspective, especially when combined with discussions of policy?

The problem is complex. On the one hand, the literature on women and development contributes to the creation of a homogeneous third world woman who is inherently alien to "us." On the other hand, one of the things that goes along with the modernization approach is the attitude that we are all the same: third world women's hopes and aspirations are limited by their oppression, but if we could

show them the way (or alter the constraints they face), they would want what we want, and that is why the policies we recommend are universally applicable.

Students grasp this as a way of identifying with the women we read about in class, and in teaching the course, identification is a powerful way to challenge the idea that third world women are necessarily and inherently Other. This is another reason I use personal stories and novels, such as *I, Rigoberta Menchú* and *Nervous Conditions.* It is easy for students to see that they might act and react the way the women they read about do if they were faced with the same situations.

The problem with this approach is that it allows students to remain intolerant of difference and eliminates the need to acknowledge diversity: "They *look* different, but they aren't really (from us or from each other); they are like us, they want what we want." The students' desire to believe this is very strong. I once gave a paper assignment which required students to compare Menchú's early life in *I, Rigoberta Menchú* and that of Tambu in *Nervous Conditions.* Almost without exception, the students created a story of individual achievement in which each girl pulled herself up by her bootstraps to be successful, Menchú as an activist and Tambu as an educated woman. This story had little textual support and completely failed to acknowledge the differences in circumstance facing the two girls, or the authors' own interpretations of their lives and voices. It did serve, however, to recreate them as girls "just like us." And if they are girls like us, there is no need to acknowledge difference, much less to engage it.

So the other major challenge in teaching this material is in some ways the opposite of the problem of students defining a homogeneous third world woman as Other. How do you teach a course on women and development that recognizes diversity and promotes the acceptance, or better yet, the welcoming of difference? There is thus an ongoing tension in the course between the desire for sameness and an underlying ideology of otherness, conflated into an understanding of development as a process of transforming "them" into "us."

The way I dealt with this in the past was by highlighting differences when I saw the desire to homogenize, pointing out similarities when students fashioned the Other, and showing the actual and potential damage done by development policy based on either approach. This helps, but I have come to believe it is not enough, because the authority of the text, such as that of modernization or of case studies, is only challenged in the margins.

What I want the students to see is that, although there are certainly many similarities among women (e.g., mothers love their children everywhere), there are also many differences: Mothers love their children, but how they love, how they show their love, and what that love signifies to them and their children is likely to be very different across cultures and is historically specific. Culture matters. History matters.

To get at the problems I have posed here, both in theory and in

classroom practice, I now incorporate in my course a substantial section on poststructuralist and postcolonial feminist critiques that address exactly these issues.[6] As I discussed previously, Chandra Mohanty gives an explicit analysis of how the literature on women and development produces a problematic universal third world woman. In positing social science discourse on development as a part of the larger colonial project, Mohanty allows us to raise questions about the importance of positioning. What interests are served in the creation of a third world woman who is by definition in need of being saved (especially from an equally homogeneous third world man), and incapable of saving herself? The role of savior is left to the first world.[7] Trinh Minh-ha, in her film *Reassemblage* (1982), and her book *Woman, Native, Other* (1989), addresses the power of first world narratives to define the third world, the dangers of such representations, and the losses incurred in accepting them. What happens to a theory of modernization when faced with Trinh's comment: "Scarcely twenty years were enough to make two billion people define themselves as underdeveloped?"[8] Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing's ethnography of the Maratus of Indonesia demonstrates the complexity of culture and the profound limits of traditional views of development when contrasted with this complexity. What does it mean for a universal concept of development when not only progress but also marginality are understood as socially constructed categories?

When placed in the context of the traditional literature on women and development, I hope to use such works not only to question and analyze the assumptions underlying this literature (as well as the students' understanding of the *third world* and *third world women*), but to begin to pose alternatives. What would development and development policy look like if it acknowledged diversity and empowered diverse peoples to define and enact their own idea of "development?" Would it resemble in any way our current understanding and practice? How would it differ and in what ways would this change women's lives?

This material is difficult on a number of fronts. It is hard to read, because in attempting to escape imposed ideologies and narratives of development, it must use unfamiliar language and challenge assumptions students often did not know were there. It is also difficult politically. The idea that development as traditionally understood may be part of the problem is a hard one for an undergraduate to face. And one of the dangers of attention to difference, especially in a culture generally intolerant of diversity, is that the students will shut down: "I can never understand them." These works not only acknowledge diversity but also invite engagement with it, however, and many students accept the invitation.

I do not believe that I have solved the problems I am pointing out here. The literature on women and development did not create ideologies of essentialism, ethnocentrism, or intolerance of diversity.

Students come to my classes with these ideologies in place, and I myself must struggle with them as a specialist in the field. But the course can be taught in such a way that it leaves such ideologies unchallenged, or it can challenge them by addressing their presence. This challenge cannot eliminate the problem, but it can provide an alternative framework that allows further challenges.

NOTES

1. I continue to use the highly problematic terms *third world* and *first world* in this context, in part because the oppositions they represent (and construct) make their way inevitably into courses on women and development. That these terms must be deconstructed does not obviate their power. At the same time, political resistance to first world domination has been and continues to be organized on the basis of an "imagined community" of peoples in the South, as Chandra Mohanty (1991a, 4) points out. For further discussion of the issues at stake here, see also Mohanty's essay (1991b), "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses."

   I choose not to capitalize the terms *first world* and *third world* because I believe that capitalization transforms these terms into proper names that further rigidify highly problematic assumptions about the postcolonial world, while contributing in particular to the homogenization of the so-called *third world.*
2. My own background is in economics, with specializations in women and development as well as Latin American studies, but I also have longstanding interests in feminist and postcolonial theories. I have taught courses in women and development at two small liberal arts colleges in the Northeast and at a midsize public university in the Southeast, in departments of economics, international studies, and interdisciplinary studies. I have also taught short units on this material in courses on environment and development, farm workers in the United States, introduction to Latin American studies, and postcolonial theories of imperialism. I am thus basing this paper on what may be a unique experience of teaching women and development at the undergraduate level in a variety of institutional settings with differing disciplinary and interdisciplinary contexts.
3. For an excellent history of WID, see Irene Tinker (1990), "The Making of a Field: Advocates, Practitioners, and Scholars."
4. There has been a corresponding change in course titles across the country. I maintain the title of my course as "Women and Development" to avoid as much as possible the inevitable danger of de-emphasizing the importance of women's concerns, though I certainly incorporate a gender and development approach.
5. For example, Ann Leonard's 1989 anthology, *Seeds: Supporting Women's Work in the Third World.*
6. In addition to Mohanty's (1991b) "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses," I also use Trinh Minh-ha's (1982) film *Reassemblage,* her books *Woman, Native, Other* (1989) and *Framer Framed* (1992), as well as Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing's (1993) *In the Realm of the Diamond Queen.*
7. Or, in Gayatri Spivak's (1988, 296–97) terms, "white men saving brown women from brown men." In this case, white women may be the operative agents.

8. This quotation is from Trinh's film *Reassemblage,* reprinted in *Framer Framed* (1992, 96).

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Mohanty, Chandra. 1991a. "Introduction—Cartographies of Struggle: Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism." In Chandra Mohanty, Ann Russo, and Lourdes Torres, eds., *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism,* 1–47. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

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Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. 1988. "Can the Subaltern Speak?" In Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg, eds., *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture,* 271–313. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.

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SYLLABUS. INTERDISCIPLINARY APPROACHES TO CONTEMPORARY ISSUES: WOMEN AND DEVELOPMENT

Women's experiences in the process of "development" in the third world have been very different from those of men. Policies that have benefited men have tended to have limited or even negative effects on women, and those that have had generally negative effects have tended to hurt women more than men. At the same time, however, women have come to be recognized as vital to the success of most development projects, even those from which they will not benefit. Beginning with fundamental questions addressing the meaning of development and the importance of perspective in defining the success of a policy, this course will analyze the lives and welfare of women in the South and consider alternative definitions and approaches to development which may take into account their perspectives. Topics to be covered will include work, income distribution, household formation, health and population, education, the environment, structural adjustment, and feminist critiques of the design, implementations and evaluation of policy. We will also consider the contribution postcolonial feminist theory can make to a discussion of the problems and possibilities of development as currently understood and practiced.

Texts

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Minh-ha, Trinh T.. 1989. *Woman, Native, Other.* Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Momsen, Janet Henshall. 1991. *Women and Development in the Third World.* New York: Routledge.

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Other required reading will be put on reserve.

Week 1. Introduction: Women and Development?

Sen and Grown, "Introduction" and "Gender and Class in Development Experience," pp. 15–49.

Weeks 2 and 3. Women's Work

Momsen, chapter 5, "Women and Work in Urban Areas," and chapter 6, "Spatial Patterns of Women's Economic Activity," pp. 67–92.

Safa, Helen. 1997. "Where the Big Fish Eat the Little Fish: Women's Work in the Free-Trade Zones," *NACLA Report on the Americas* 30(5)(March–April): 31–36.

Momsen, chapter 3, "Reproduction," pp. 27–43.

Bunster, Ximena, and Elsa M. Chaney. 1989. *Sellers and Servants: Working Women in Lima, Peru*. Granby, Mass.: Bergin & Garvey. "María," pp. 81–131.

United Nations. 1991. *The World's Women*. New York: The United Nations. "Counting Economically Active Women," p. 85, and "Measuring Women's Economic Contribution in the United Nations System of National Accounts," p. 90.

Momsen, chapter 4, "Women and Work in Rural Areas," pp. 44–66.

Deere, Carmen Diana. 1987. "The Latin American Agrarian Reform Experience." In Carmen Diana Deer and Magdelena León, eds., *Rural Women and State Policy*, pp. 165–190. Boulder: Westview Press.

Films: With These Hands, *1985, Chris Sheppard and Claude Sauvageot, The New Internation-alist;* Kumekucha (From Sunup), *1987, Flora M'mugu-Schelling; and* Kamala and Raji, *1990, Michael Camerini, Cheryl Groff, and Shireen Huq, PDR Productions.*

Week 4. Household Organization and Distribution: Health

Young, Kate. 1992. "Household Resource Management." In Lise Østergaard, ed., *Gender and Development: A Practical Guide,* pp. 135–64. New York: Routledge.

Brown, Susan. 1975. "Love Unites Them and Hunger Separates Them: Poor Women in the Dominican Republic." In Rayna R. Reiter, ed., *Toward an Anthropology of Women,* pp. 322–32. New York: Monthly Review Press.

De los Angeles Crummet, María. 1992. "Rural Women and Migration in Latin America." In Carmen Diana Deere and Magdalena León, eds., *Rural Women and State Policy,* pp. 239–60. Boulder: Westview Press.

Østergaard, Lise. 1992. "Health." In Lise Østergaard, ed., *Gender and Development: A Practical Guide,* pp. 110–34. New York: Routledge.

Weeks 5 and 6. Population, Education, Environment

Barroso, Carmen, and Cristini Bruschini. 1991. "Building Politics from Personal Lives: Discussions on Sexuality Among Poor Women in Brazil." In Chandra Mohanty, Ann Russo, and Lourdes Torres, eds., *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism,* pp. 153–72. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Deshingkar, Giri. 1991. "Population Control: Beyond State Policy." *Manushi* 67(November–December): 10–12.

Bang, Rani, and Abhay Bang. 1992. "Contraceptive Technologies: Experience of Rural Women." *Manushi* 70(May–June): 26–31.

Summers, Lawrence. 1994. *Investing in All the People: Educating Women in Developing Countries.* Washington, D.C.: World Bank.

Agarwal, Bina. 1992. "The Gender and Environment Debate: Lessons from India." *Feminist Studies* 18 (1): 119–58.

Week 7. Small Project Experiences

Kneerim, Jill. 1989. "Village Women Organize: The Mraru, Kenya Bus Service." In Leonard, ed., pp. 15–30.

Caughman, Susan, and Miriam N'diaye Thiam. 1989. "The Markala, Mali Cooperative: A New Approach to Traditional Economic Roles." In Leonard, ed., pp. 31–48.

McLeod, Ruth. 1989. "The Kingston Women's Construction Collective: Building for the Future in Jamaica." In Leonard, ed., pp. 163–87.

Chen, Marty. 1989. "The Working Women's Forum: Organizing for Credit and Change in Madras, India." In Leonard, ed., pp. 51–72.

Molnar, Augusta. 1989. "Forest Conservation in Nepal: Encouraging Women's Partici-pation." In Leonard, ed., pp. 98–119.

Week 8. Restructuring the Economy

Moser, Caroline O. N. 1992. "Adjustment from Below: Low-Income Women, Time and the Triple Role in Guayaquil, Ecuador." In Haleh Afshar and Carolyne Dennis, eds., *Women and Adjustment Policies in the Third World,* pp. 87–116. London: Macmillan.

Benería, Lourdes. 1992. "The Mexican Debt Crisis: Restructuring the Economy and the Household." In Lourdes Benería and Shelley Feldman, eds., *Unequal Burden: Economic Crises, Persistent Poverty, and Women's Work,* pp. 83–104. Boulder: Westview.

Film: Hell to Pay, *1988, Alexandra Anderson and Anne Cottringer, Women Make Movies.*

Weeks 9 and 10. Legacies of Colonialism

Dangarembga, *Nervous Conditions*.

Weeks 11–14. Questions of Representation

Mohanty, Chandra. 1991. "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses." In Chandra Mohanty, Ann Russo, and Lourdes Torres, eds., *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism,* pp. 51–80. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Trinh, "Reassemblage," pp. 95–105; "Film as Translation," pp. 111–33; and "Professional Censorship," pp. 213–21. In *Framer Framed,* (New York: Routledge).

Trinh, "The Language of Nativism," pp. 47–78; "Difference: 'A Special Third World Women Issue,'" pp. 79–116. In *Woman, Native, Other.*

Tsing, *In the Realm of the Diamond Queen.*

Week 15. Alternative Visions?

Sen and Grown, "Alternative Visions, Strategies, and Methods," pp. 78–96.